

# Cultural Diplomacy: Arts, Festivals and Geopolitics

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Edited by Milena Dragičević Šešić,  
with Ljiljana Rogač Mijatović and  
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A new comprehensive book, *Cultural Diplomacy: Arts, Festivals and Geopolitics* edited by Milena Dragičević Šešić in collaboration with Ljiljana Rogač Mijatović and Nina Mihaljinac, brings together results from two separate projects — the conference 'BITEF and Cultural Diplomacy: Theatre and Geopolitics', and the research project about the state of the art in international and regional cultural collaboration in Serbia funded by the Creative Europe Desk Serbia. Divided into five chapters, *Cultural Diplomacy* contains a selection of texts written by prominent international scholars, practitioners, and activists in the field of culture today. The authors are dealing with the current key questions in the field of cultural diplomacy challenging its conceptual boundaries, discussing the role of the actors and, ultimately, addressing the need for its reformulation.

The concept 'cultural diplomacy' may open some questions to the reader, especially if one is familiar with the term 'international cultural cooperation' or with the recent proliferation of the EU's documents on culture in external relations. A reader who is an outsider to the world of cultural policies might expect that the opening chapter of the book would give an overview of the basic theoretical background of cultural diplomacy research and its conceptualisation, especially taking into consideration the book's size (400 pages). However, due to a certain shift in the understanding of this concept, as a number of authors in the first part of the book stress, this is not the case. Cultural diplomacy was originally labelled as 'government business' (p. 53), but is now considered as operating 'beyond the national interest' (Ang et al. 2015). Nevertheless, several authors in the book's first chapter, 'Cultural diplomacy: Soft power or fair cooperation', have defined cultural diplomacy within the context of globalisation and the new geopolitical situation. For example, Melissa

Nisbett analyses the concepts which are close to the concept of cultural diplomacy, such as soft power, cultural relations, and propaganda. She argues that it is better to answer the question of what cultural diplomacy *isn't* rather than to try to define what it is. The EU discourse is not mentioned in this first chapter, even though the elaboration of EU framework would provide a better, current insight into this subject. Serhan Ada looks back at the history of cultural diplomacy and highlights the role of the USA and Russia in the Cold War, while Jonathan Vickery analyses some of the most important UNESCO's programmes and conventions that tackled the question of international political agency for culture. Throughout the book, the reader is continually reminded how slippery the term cultural diplomacy remains. However, aside from a discussion of proper terminology, the more valuable thing this book offers is a plethora of examples of the so-called 'cultural diplomacy from below'. In the first section of the book, several authors provide examples of unconventional cultural diplomacy that highlight the role of civil society. For example, Monika Mokre examines state politics towards refugees and migrants in Austria. Similarly, Anika Hampel discusses partnership-based cooperation in cultural policy and cultural management using five case studies of German-Indian cooperation in the arts, and she uses this discussion to make recommendations for the future realisation of equal partnerships ("fair cooperation") in international exchanges. In an interesting article on the link between populism and culture, Raphaela Henze also advocates for community-based projects. This time they are seen as a way of overcoming elitism in the arts and enabling the increase in democratisation of the artistic process.

The second chapter deals with festivals and addresses them as both art platforms and important instruments in cultural diplomacy. In this way, BITEF (Belgrade International Theatre Festival) as an important theatre festival articulates good practices of bottom-up cultural diplomacy. The conference 'BITEF and Cultural Diplomacy: Theatre and Geopolitics' held in Belgrade in 2016 produced respectful material which is summarised in the first part of the chapter. It highlights the role of cultural leaders such as Mira Trailović, re-examines the cultural policy of socialist Yugoslavia (Ksenija Radulović), and focuses on the functioning of BITEF in the contemporary period (Anja Suša). On the other hand, the broader framework of festivals is covered by Darko Lukić. In his essay on inclusive practices at the international performing arts festivals, he

contends that the new agenda should be based on knowledge transfer. New idioms and frameworks in cultural diplomacy are advocated by Ana Žuvela by using the example of the Dubrovnik Summer Festival, while Mike van Gran addresses the issue of cultural diplomacy taking place in the 'deeply unequal economic, political, military, and cultural relations'. Thus, this chapter argues for a future, trans-disciplinary approach that will pave a new way towards a better understanding of cultural diplomacy, one which reflects on values and makes solidarity a primary issue.

The third chapter of the book complements the first one, as it focuses on the shifting trends and new actors and forms in cultural diplomacy. The chapter starts with the contribution of the book's co-editor, Ljiljana Rogač Mijatović. In her essay based on the findings of her book *Cultural Diplomacy and Identity of Serbia*, she explores the possibility of Serbia's repositioning through culture. Some of the main concepts from the first chapter (such as cultural relations and nation branding) are again present in this chapter, although within a different context. In her article on cities and regions in the context of "paradiplomacy" or decentralised diplomatic actions, Leda Laggiard distinguishes between cultural relations and cultural diplomacy. A somewhat unusual niche of diplomacy – gastrodiplomacy – and nation branding in Serbia is covered by Tanja Strugar. Along the same line comes the final text of this chapter written by Mina Popović, who explores the link between fashion and nation branding.

The last chapter of the book deals with the issue of cultural diplomacy from the perspective of Serbian authors. The research project of Creative Europe Desk Serbia has explored cooperation practices within different cultural sectors. The results are presented through the work of eight different authors in this chapter who offer analyses of research results from the audio-visual sector, from the visual arts, the performing arts, and literature, from creative industries, cultural heritage, science and from the theory of art. The comparative analysis of results showed that diverse fields of culture have the same strengths and weaknesses; consequently, similar recommendations for the development of international cooperation in Serbia can be made. At the end, a statistical appendix presents data collected from the survey of European and international cultural cooperation in Serbia. The appendix presents the successful achievements of Serbia during the first three years of the

Creative Europe programme.

Due to the impact of globalisation, diplomacy is a rapidly evolving field (L'Etang 2009). However, the dynamics of international relations have created a problematic relationship between the nation state and other actors in the arena. In addition, culture, as a tool of soft power, is used to influence other dimensions of the country, in most cases, the economic one. Unarguably, tackling the question of cultural diplomacy will always be quite an ambitious move. Certainly, the reader will have an impression that the book could easily be twice this size. At the same time, the book will serve as an inspiring source for further research. It is easy to conclude that this collection of articles, written by prominent researchers in the field, works perfectly both as relevant literature for scholars and as a resourceful guide for practitioners. There is lack of literature on the subject of cultural diplomacy internationally, but it is especially lacking with respect to Southeast Europe. This lack not only concerns the lack of literature on conventional theoretical approaches to cultural diplomacy but also on practices and bottom-up approaches that contribute towards new concepts and new definitions of cultural diplomacy. Thus, the book, generously offered free for download, comes as a valuable inspirational piece, which fits perfectly into a puzzle called cultural diplomacy.

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## References

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